

Don't Think about Elephants

Read from L. S. Chafer's Systematic Theology.

Spring Valley Bible Church teaches topics from theology because it contains answers. There are topics like redemption, propitiation and reconciliation.

Redemption teaches us that Jesus Christ bore the sins of the world. Everyone's sins.

1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

1 John 2:2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Some, not us, teach that Jesus only bore the sins of those who would believe in Jesus. They then say that people go to the Lake of Fire as a result of their sins. But the doctrine of redemption teaches that Jesus died for all sins. It is a necessary condition for our salvation that Jesus bore our sins on the cross. Unbelievers are judged on the basis of human works that fall short of the righteousness of God.

Isaiah 64:6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

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Propitiation teaches that God is satisfied with the work of Jesus on the cross. That work is called the “Blood of Christ” referring back to the Old Testament sacrifices. “Blood” refers to the death of the animal. For Jesus it refers to His spiritual death on the cross as a result of being judged for all sins. Redemption says that Jesus’ sacrifice is a necessary condition for our salvation. God is satisfied with Jesus’ sacrifice. Propitiation says that Jesus’ sacrifice is a sufficient condition for our salvation. We are saved as a result of our faith dependence on that sacrifice of Jesus. Some would say that works are necessary to maintain our salvation. Propitiation teaches that only our faith is necessary because Jesus already did the necessary work on the cross.

Reconciliation teaches that as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice the believer is reconciled to God. We now have peace, not war, with God. The believer now has fellowship with God. The gates of blessing are now open.

The Bible contains answers for life. There are profound questions asked by philosophers concerning the existence of human life. “Where did we come from? What is our purpose? What happens when we die?” The Bible answers all of those and many other questions. Unfortunately, most philosophers do not subscribe to Biblical answers. But we do.

During my first two years in college I was an unbeliever in search of something. I was a practicing Catholic. The Catholic priest at the college was a liberal. He conversed regularly with a liberal Protestant pastor. They got portions of their congregations together. We talked about various aspects of Christianity. One of the questions discussed was “What is a Christian?” What qualified a person to claim he or she was a Christian? The answers were all over the map. But again, the Bible answers that question.

We start the answer with acknowledging that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. That was something that the liberal priest and liberal

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pastor rejected. But once you accept the Bible as the inerrant inspired Word of God, it is time to listen to what it says.

The early Christians understood the Bible's claim.

John 3:16 “For (literally: In this manner) God so loved the world, that He gave His only (or uniquely) begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Whoever believes in Him, in other words Jesus Christ, shall not perish. That person has “eternal life.” The implication is that the person who rejects faith in Jesus Christ will perish without eternal life. That is stated further on in John chapter 3.

John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas how to be saved, their reply was:

Acts 16:31 They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

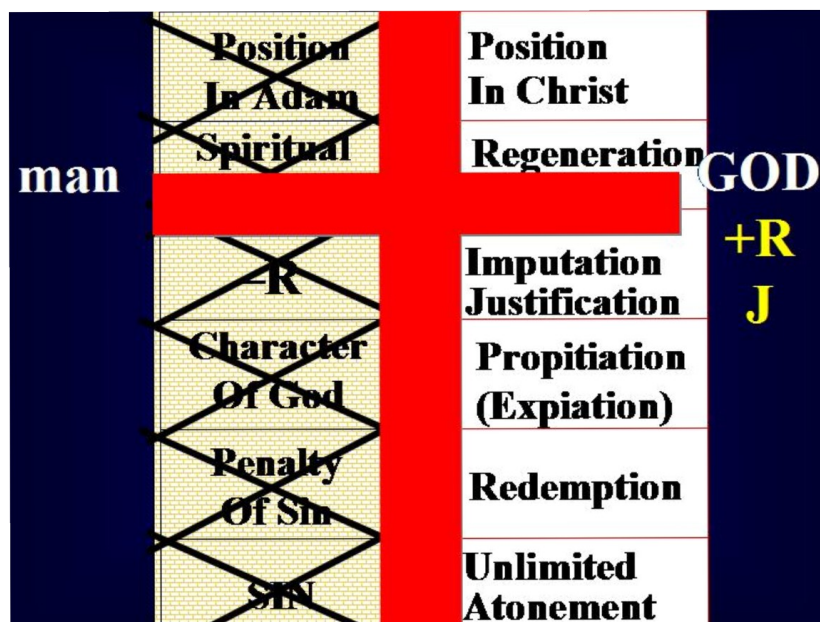
A Christian is one who has believed in Jesus Christ as savior. This is the answer to the question, “What qualifies someone to be called a Christian?” Faith alone in Christ alone. No works. No complex philosophy. Just faith.

Why Christ? Peter told the Jewish priestly hierarchy about Jesus Christ:

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Acts 4:12 And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name (referring to Jesus Christ) under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The reason is that Jesus Christ is the only person who was qualified to be judged for the sins of the world because of the virgin birth. He lived a perfect life and was judged. But there remains a barrier between man and God.



The Barrier Between Man and God¹

There remains the righteousness of God and the life of God. Without those an unbeliever is not saved. By faith in Jesus the new believer instantly receives both the imputation of God's righteousness and His life. This does not mean we are perfect. We still have a sin nature. But it does mean we now have the ability to have fellowship with God.

¹ <https://www.deanbible.org/file-downloads?folder=Visuals%252FIllustrations>

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As we have seen in Romans chapter 6, Jesus Christ baptized the believer by means of the Holy Spirit (i.e. the baptism of the Holy Spirit) which placed each believer “in Christ.” This is something not available in the Old Testament in the dispensation of the Law. I am stressing the “position in Christ” or “positional truth” because we have so many blessings “in Christ.” It is the foundation of our Christian lives.

But now, we have a mandate from God, expressed by Paul in Romans chapters 6-8 to live according to the Law of Christ, the law of love. This is not legalism. It is walking by faith dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is not an experience, just an orientation of our thinking. Living by faith. Trusting in God.

In the last part of Romans chapter 6 and in the first part of Romans chapter 7, Paul pleads with the believer reading Romans to not sin. It is a mandate to not sin. It is possible to not sin. We have the ability to walk by faith and depend on God the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Paul's words.

Romans 7:1 Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?

Romans 7:2 For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.

Remember that Christ's relationship to the Church is analogous to a husband's relationship to his wife.

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Romans 7:3 So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

Romans 7:4 Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

In order that. This expresses the Christian's purpose in life. But that fruit is produced by God the Holy Spirit in us.

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

Galatians 5:23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Now Paul tells us that the Mosaic Law, which is perfect, can result in a person stirring up sinful passions. Temptation goes into action.

Romans 7:5 For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

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Romans 7:6 But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

So that. Another purpose clause. We serve in newness of Spirit which produces spiritual fruit.

Romans 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

A mother tells her child, “Do not take cookies out of the cookie jar.” The child is then tempted to steal cookies from the cookie jar. Was the mother wrong? No! What she said was perfect, like the Mosaic Law. But the command caused the child to consider the temptation and act on it.

Paul is identifying a purpose of the Mosaic Law: to identify sin. The Mosaic Law did not come with the solution to keeping the Law. Christians have a higher law but it comes with the filling of the Holy Spirit. We can keep the Law of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is quoting from the Ten Commandments concerning covetousness. Although the Mosaic Law does not apply to Christians, there are principles found in the Old Testament that apply in the current dispensation. All of the Ten Commandments except the Sabbath command are repeated in the New Testament.

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Exodus 20:17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Paul, as an unbeliever, led an exemplary life. He didn’t practice overt sins. But covet is not an overt sin. Some of the worst sins are mental attitude sins. The one I mention almost weekly is hatred. This sin is a terrible sin that can destroy a person that engages in it. Hatred starts as a mental attitude sin but can push the sinner into violent action.

Proverbs 6:16 There are six things which the Lord hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:

**Proverbs 6:17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,**

Proverbs 6:18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil,

**Proverbs 6:19 A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers.**

Some of these do not make the lists of sins touted by legalistic Christians. They point to overt sins. You can see those. But God knows our mental attitude sins.

Thomas Constable comments on these:

“The phrase "six ... seven" (v. 16) implies that this list is not exhaustive of what God hates, though it is explicit (cf. Deut. 16:22; Ps. 45:7; Eccles.

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3:8; Rev. 2:6). These seven practices deal with attitude (v. 17a), thought (18a), speech (17b, 19a), action (17c, 18b), and influence (19b).²

The point being made here is that even overt sins start in the mind. What you think determines what you do. So Paul as a self-righteous Pharisee was proud of his compliance with the Law. As a believer Paul may have thought similar thoughts until he understood that there is such a thing as a mental attitude sin. When he encountered the commandment to not covet he began to understand that mental attitude sins are sins. He also realized that the Law could not remedy the situation. Indeed, once he realized this, he had even more difficulty avoiding this sin. It is like asking someone to not think of the word “elephant.” For the next few minutes you fight the thought of “elephant.”

Here is an observation to ponder. It was obvious that as an unbeliever Paul was very religious, very legalistic like the Pharisees. He was one. The first letter Paul wrote was the letter to the Galatian churches. The thrust of the letter is to avoid legalism. To walk by the Spirit and not by the Law. Is it possible that this lesson was one of the first great discoveries of Paul? He was used to living according to the legal standards of the Law. He discovered a purpose of the Law was to demonstrate that compliance of the Law via the sin nature was not possible. It was only possible by means of the power of the Holy Spirit. It may have been one of Paul's first spiritual struggles. So when he discovered the solution, he wanted his audience to gain the benefit of his struggle and eventual discovered solution.

But it is not just coveting that is wrong.

Hatred is a sin. Jealousy is a sin. Many other terrible sins are centered in human thought before they break out into overt action.

² <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/pdf/proverbs.pdf>

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Romans 7:8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.

Do not think of an elephant. Now you cannot think of anything other than an elephant. Paul encountered coveting in the Law. Then he saw that he was constantly engaging in coveting.

Romans 7:9 I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died;

Romans 7:10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;

Romans 7:11 for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Sin kills spiritual life.

Romans 7:12 So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.